



The Nevada Test Site town of Mercury, Nevada. Frenchman Flat is visible toward the top of the photo as a light streak.

Second Home

The Nevada Test Site (NTS) was the “second home” for many employees for most of their Lab careers. If employees weren’t at Livermore, they were probably at NTS. The majority of the Laboratory’s nuclear tests took place there until the moratorium in 1992 halted testing.

The Nevada Test Site was chosen by the Atomic Energy Commission in 1950 to be the first continental site for nuclear weapons testing. Testing had already taken place in New Mexico and in the Pacific, but the U.S. wanted an alternate site that was spacious and remote. They certainly got that with NTS.

Bigger than the state of Rhode Island, NTS is approximately 1,375 square miles and is 65 miles north of Las Vegas. When testing was in full swing, the site provided employees with a steak house, bowling alley, jogging track, theater, baseball field, tennis courts, pool, and dormitories for 1,200 people.

The first test, an atmospheric detonation called Able, took place on January 27, 1951. But it wasn’t long before testing took place on a regular basis. Over the next 40 years, NTS would host 928 nuclear blasts.



How Did I Get into This?

Duane Sewell

Sewell, in the thick of setting up a new laboratory for Professor Lawrence, found himself with double duty on the Ruth shot, the first nuclear test attempted by the Laboratory.

I remember the morning of our first shot very, very well because it was the first nuclear device that I had had any close contact with. I went out on the arming party and armed that thing at about two in the morning, as I remember. It was cold, and it was black out there; the wind must have been blowing 35 knots. That tower was

not very stiff, and it swayed back and forth. I can still visualize going up the elevator to the top of that tower to the cab, which was made out of sheet metal. It was not very tight, and the wind was blowing through it. I can remember being up there and thinking, as you do when you get into situations like that, "What in the devil am I doing up here? How did I get into this, with this huge nuclear bomb sitting here in front of me?" The tower was swaying quite a bit, the chandeliers were mounted on loose joints, and they were swaying back and forth much like you see chandeliers in an earthquake.



Above left: Tower after the Ruth shot failed. Climbing these towers became routine for some employees.

Left: Tunnel dug for Rainier, the first contained underground test shot at the Nevada Test Site.